

**Written by R.A.F Hughes**

## **Memories of the Blitz 1940 – 1941**

During the summer holidays in 1946 I had a letter from King George VI. It was dated 8<sup>th</sup> June 1946 and written under the royal coat of arms which was impressively portrayed in blue, green, yellow and red. The lion on the crest looked very fierce and the unicorn very disdainful. The King told me that I had shared in the hardships and dangers of total war and should feel very proud. Admittedly every school boy and girl in this land had a similar letter and, yes, the signature was a facsimile but, nevertheless, in hindsight, I think our King had got it right.

I, together with my brother and many other children in the land had been in dangerous or fatal situations over the war time years. A bomb had killed two of our neighbours and another one had landed by my grandmother's front garden. A large bomb, which did not explode, had fallen close by a friend's house. Shrapnel, which consisted of jagged pieces of AA shell cases after they had exploded in the air, had fallen on us whenever the AA guns were putting up a barrage.

I was nearly seven years old when Neville Chamberlain announced over the radio that we were 'at war with Germany'. It did not mean anything to me at the time, but over the next few months I noticed hints of things to come. Sticky tapes were placed across window panes and wooden shutters appeared which were placed over our living room windows when an air raid was expected, in addition, our living room windows were sealed off with sticky tape and could not be opened. A roll of sticky tape was placed by the living room door so that, I was told, the room could be sealed off, with us in it, in the event of a gas attack.

We had by then all been issued with gas masks which we had to carry round with us in cardboard boxes. The adult civilian gas mask was made of rubber with a transparent panel to see through and woven cotton straps to hold it in place on one's head, a filter (called a container) was fixed below the transparent panel; subsequently a second green filter was taped to the first. We all had to practice wearing our gas masks to try to get used to them. As you breathed in, air was pulled in through the filters and when you breathed out the air escaped from under the mask over your cheeks. The smell of rubber was very strong and the masks became very sweaty, the examples I still have were made in January and February 1938 and so the government had been thinking ahead!

The boxes we carried the gas masks in were about 6 inches (150mm) square and equipped with a cotton strap to put over one's shoulder. Each box was marked 'top' on the lid and inside precise instructions were given for storage and use.

### "When the Respirator is Required for use

1. Hold the respirator by the straps

2. Put on by first putting chin into the face piece and then draw the straps over the head. Adjust straps to obtain close but comfortable fit.
3. Take off by putting the straps over the head from the back.”

The instructions ended with the admonition

“Do not take the respirator off by putting the container upwards over the face”

Stuck to the front of the box were instructions to take “the greatest possible care” of this respirator and keep it in a cool place. A space was then left to fill in one’s name and address.

My brother (about two at this time) had a child friendly version to wear which was dubbed the ‘Mickey Mouse’ mask and babies were to be put in ventilated bags with transparent panels at the front. Civilians with jobs to do in the event of an air raid such as policemen, firemen or air raid wardens were issued with army issue respirators.

My family was located in Petersham in Surrey, between Richmond and Kingston. The village was largely owned by the Tollemache family and was, in addition, unusually shielded from suburban development by the presence of the Thames valley flood plain on one side and Richmond Park on the other. This relative under-population was soon re-balanced by the Army which expanded from their campus in Richmond Park to take over any large houses in Petersham they could requisition. All this activity was very exciting for a child. In addition, All Saints, one of the two churches in the village, was de-consecrated and used as an Army Radar School. Khaki uniforms became very familiar to us all and I used to wave to columns of squaddies as they marched through the village.

It was during this first winter that I became aware that my father had joined the ARP and become an Air Raid Warden (I still have his ARP badge). When no air raid was in progress, duties seemed to be confined to desultory night patrols to enforce blackout and reassure the inhabitants. My father’s ARP post was a dug-out situated beneath two large walnut trees opposite the Fox and Duck, a location much appreciated by the members of the Group. On the inside of the dug-out door was pinned a recognition picture of German paratrooper running towards the viewer with a snarl on his face and a gun in his hand. Nailed to one of the walnut trees was a dart board on which the wardens practised their marksmanship with a .22 rifle.

On one of my father’s duty nights we heard a key turn in the front door and suddenly my father appeared in full ARP kit. I was very impressed. He was equipped with an Army gas mask, a white canvas bag containing first aid equipment (I still have the bag), a steel helmet with a large letter W painted on the front, and a heavy cape. Over time, the issue kit became modified to accommodate local experience. In the case of the Petersham squad this happened in late 1940 when a patrolling warden was struck on the shoulder by a shard of shrapnel from one of the anti aircraft guns in Richmond Park. To counter this risk

an old car tyre was cut into sections and some of the patrollers put the sections on their shoulders like large epaulettes.

By the spring of 1940 the problem of air raid shelters for the general population had been largely dealt with. In our case we did not have a garden suitable for an Anderson shelter and so we had a Morrison shelter instead. A Morrison shelter was, in effect, a large table made of steel with steel mesh panels which you could lie in. In addition, my father reinforced the ceiling of the room with heavy baulks of timber. The Council was also constructing public shelters and built one in Richmond Park beneath a plain tree just behind the local school.

Autumn 1940 marked the beginning of the air raids over London. The first recorded bomb in Richmond fell close by a friend's house in Denbigh gardens on 9 September and did not explode. A week later another stray bomb fell on our village and did not explode either. However, on the night of 26 September at 2.15am, reality struck and a number of exploding high explosive (H.E.) bombs fell on Petersham. One of these bombs landed on Petersham Road almost directly in front of the cottage where my grandmother was living. She was sheltering in an Anderson shelter in her front garden and so was very close to the point of impact. An Anderson shelter was about 6 feet (2 m.) square and made of corrugated steel sheet. It was placed in a hole in the ground about 4 feet (1.3 m.) deep and the spoil from the hole piled on top of it. It was designed to house four people and offered a measure of protection except from a direct hit. When my father arrived on the scene he found his mother standing at the entrance of her shelter calling "Tom Tom", the name of her much loved cat (which also survived the blast). On 29 September a 'breadbasket' of incendiary bombs fell in the grounds of Petersham House and, two days later, an 'oil bomb' fell on the river tow path. The following week we had our first fatalities when an HE bomb fell on The Thatch Cottage, a short distance from our house, and killed the occupants outright. Records show that, in our area of outer London, this sort of spasmodic bombing continued for a further two months to the end of November.

In order to put matters into perspective, it is fair to say that between 1940 and 1944 about 25 HE bombs fell on Petersham and the same number in Ham adjoining, while approximately 125 fell in Richmond Park.

To me, as a small boy, air raids were very exciting affairs which began with the undulating wail of the sirens. Search lights began to criss cross the sky and then the heavy anti aircraft guns in Richmond Park would begin to set barrages in the sky in the hope that enemy bombers would fly into them. The noise of the gunfire was sharp and hollow sounding, easily distinguishable from the crump of a bomb. I collected souvenirs whenever I could and soon had a box of shrapnel for the AA guns (I have a piece in front of me from a 3.7 inch shell distinguishable by the mark of the 2 inch driving band, see photograph).

I also collected the steel tail fins of the small thermite incendiary bombs. My enthusiasm was not, however, shared by my parents. With my father on duty during raids my mother felt isolated in our house

and so sought company with her neighbours in the public shelter behind the village school. I remember the experience as being hot and humid with tension in the air. I was only allowed to go to the entrance to see the search lights, but the doors were shut when the barrages began and I was told to go and lie down. On one occasion I needed a wee, but could not find the pot which I knew my mother had brought. On enquiry, I was asked to hold on for a bit as the pot was being used as an emergency container to help put out the incendiary fires in Petersham House nearby.

At some time around the end of September 1940 my parents' collective nerve must have broken because my next sequence of memories is based in a small village community some six miles inland from Aberystwyth in Cardiganshire. So far as I can gather, there was already a small colony of families from Petersham in Capel Bangor when we first arrived. My father drove us there in the Ford 8 motor car, no doubt on black market petrol. My mother teamed up with the Reed family, mother and daughter and rented a small cottage called Penrhyn Coch situated on the side of a hill at the end of an unmade road. Drinking water was available from a spring nearby and the toilet was a bucket in a timber hut close by, overlooking the valley below. That year we had an Indian summer and I remember building a tree house nearby and playing on the hillside in warm autumn sunshine. As winter closed in, however, reality struck home and a heavy rainstorm caused water to penetrate the rear wall of the cottage and flow across the floor and out of the front door. When the first snows came the spring froze up and our water came from melted snow. Enough was enough.

The Reed family returned to Capel Bangor and my mother teamed up with the Wyatt family, mother, daughter and son, to take possession of a larger, more substantial farm house called Goginan Plas in Old Goginan, a village in the next valley. The photograph shows how isolated the house was. The staff quarters of the house were occupied by a tenant farmer who farmed the surrounding land. Water was obtained from the farm well and the (bucket) loo was an integral part of the house, albeit reached via an external door. The remainder of the winter was bitterly cold and the only fuel to keep the fires going was dead wood from the surrounding trees. We all helped gathering and sawing up the branches, saying that the wood warmed us twice, once in the cutting up and once in the burning. Light was provided by paraffin lamps and I still pride myself on being able to trim wicks to give an even flame. When weather permitted I went to the nearest local school walking alone across field stubble and down winding lanes. On arrival, however, I learnt little as lessons were conducted in Welsh.

As winter lost its grip in the spring of 1941 a new world opened in front of me. As the photograph shows the valley was dotted with small farmsteads each occupied by a farming family as curious as ourselves about their new neighbours. I wandered freely over these farmsteads, accompanying farmers as they tended their animals and cultivated the land. I learnt the commands for sheep dogs and horses, I tried to plough (but was not strong enough to keep the furrows straight). I watched the cows and mare being serviced and saw the family pig being (barbarically) slaughtered. I fished for the small brown trout which

lived in the stream at the bottom of the valley and looked for the buzzard's nest which I was told was nearby. It was a small boy's heaven.

Back in Petersham my father was feeling lonely. In the six months following the raids in November 1940 there had only been one raid, in February 1941, which affected Petersham and, as the longest day of the year arrived, he judged that it was time for the family to reunite. We returned by train, via Crewe, probably in July just before the harvest. The train was overcrowded and the journey seemed never ending: I spent most of it sitting on a corridor floor, but was overjoyed to see a red double-decker bus again. I was home.